

PANGKALAN RAMA

1119 M-1275 M

Bukti Peradaban Bintang Kuno Yang Ditepikan



NURI CHE SHIDDIQ



The Citadel of Pangkalan Rama: A Geo-Historical and Architectural Reconstruction of the Istana Mahligai (1119–1275 CE)

1. Introduction: The Forgotten Epoch of the Straits

The historiography of the Malay Archipelago has traditionally been bifurcated into the early classical period of Srivijaya (7th–11th centuries) and the later Islamic sultanates of Malacca and Johor (15th–17th centuries). This binary periodization often obscures the critical transitional era of the 12th and 13th centuries—a period of profound geopolitical realignment, architectural innovation, and state formation. It is within this historical interstice that the settlement of **Pangkalan Rama** on Bintan Island emerges as a polity of paramount significance. Active between **1119 CE and 1275 CE**, Pangkalan Rama represents a sophisticated "hydropolity"—a state whose existence was predicated on the mastery of riverine and maritime interfaces.

This report serves as an exhaustive historical and architectural audit of Pangkalan Rama, with a specific focus on its nucleus: the **Istana Mahligai**. By synthesizing analysis of the *Kitāb 'Azīmat-e Pādshāh-e Daryā* state charter, reconstruction of visual data derived from ancient cartography, and architectural forensics of the palace's destruction and subsequent rebirth, we aim to reconstruct the lived reality of this fortress-settlement. The narrative that follows is not merely a description of a building but an interrogation of how the built environment—from the humble pier to the gold-gilded spire—served as the physical manifestation of *Daulat* (sovereignty) in a volatile maritime world.

The significance of Pangkalan Rama lies in its dual nature: it was both a defensive bastion, responding to the power vacuums left by the decline of Srivijaya, and a cosmopolitan court founded by **Bahram Syah al-Bahrī**, a figure bridging the Persianate and Malay worlds. The trajectory of the Istana Mahligai—from its strategic siting to its incineration by fire and its triumphant, gold-laden reconstruction—mirrors the resilience of the Malay maritime state itself. This report will dissect these phases, offering a definitive account of a site where the river met the sea, and where history was written in timber and gold.

2. Geopolitical Genesis: The Crisis of 1119 CE

2.1 The Post-Srivijayan Power Vacuum

To understand the rationale behind the fortification of Pangkalan Rama, one must first confront the chaotic geopolitical landscape of the early 12th century. The Chola raids of 1025 CE had effectively shattered the centralized hegemony of the Srivijayan thalassocracy. By 1119 CE, the Straits of Malacca were no longer policed by a single imperial navy but were instead a contested zone of rival mandalas, pirate confederacies, and emerging port-polities. The trade routes that connected the Song Dynasty of China to the Abbasid Caliphate and the Fatimids of Egypt required secure transshipment points, yet security was the scarcest commodity of the age.¹

It was in this context that Pangkalan Rama was established. Unlike the agrarian kingdoms of Java (such as Kediri) which drew power from the hinterland, Pangkalan Rama was a "negeri" in the truest sense—a city-state oriented entirely towards the water. Its foundation in 1119 CE was a calculated response to the need for a secure, defensible harbor that could guarantee the safety of merchant vessels passing through the southern entrance of the Straits. The settlement was not an organic village that grew over time; the historical data suggests a planned foundation, a "planted city" designed from the outset to serve as a center of administration and defense.

2.2 The Founder: Bahram Syah al-Bahrī

The figure of the founder, **Bahram Syah al-Bahrī**, provides the crucial link between the local Malay context and the broader currents of Eurasian history. Identified as a prince of the Ghaznavid dynasty (Yamin ad-Dawlah Abul-Muzaffar Bahram-Shah), his presence in the archipelago was the result of a high-stakes dynastic struggle. Following the death of Sultan Mas'ud III in 1115 CE, the Ghaznavid Empire descended into a brutal war of succession. Bahram Syah, facing the aggression of his brother Arslan Syah, was forced to flee.¹

His expedition, termed the '*Azīmat* (Royal Maritime Expedition), was not the flight of a refugee but the migration of a sovereign court. Supported by a strategic alliance with the **Seljuk Sultanate of Kerman**, Bahram Syah arrived in the archipelago equipped with the naval expertise and administrative technologies necessary to establish a state. The choice of Bintan Island—a location known since the time of Ptolemy as a strategic pivot—was deliberate. Pangkalan Rama was to be the "New Ghazni" of the East, a kingdom where the Persianate concepts of kingship could be fused with the maritime prowess of the Malay people.¹

2.3 The *Kitāb 'Azīmat* as State Charter

The foundation of Pangkalan Rama was codified in the *Kitāb 'Azīmat-e Pādshāh-e Daryā* (The Book of the Royal Maritime Expedition). This document, authored in 1119 CE at Pangkalan Rama, challenges the notion that pre-Islamic Malay states relied solely on oral tradition. The *Kitāb* functioned as a constitution, outlining the *qanun* (laws), maritime regulations, and the oaths of loyalty binding the *Orang Besar* (nobles) to the ruler. It transformed Pangkalan Rama from a mere settlement into a legal entity, a state with defined borders, rights, and responsibilities.¹ The Istana Mahligai was built to house this charter and to serve as the

physical court where its laws were adjudicated.

3. The Geo-Spatial Configuration of Pangkalan Rama

3.1 The Island Fortress Concept

Pangkalan Rama was defined by its insularity. The settlement was located on a "pemukiman benteng pulau" (fortified island settlement) situated "di tengah sungai lebar" (in the middle of a wide river). This typology—the riverine island citadel—is a masterstroke of defensive planning prevalent in Southeast Asian warfare. By isolating the citadel from the mainland, the planners utilized the river as a permanent, non-negotiable moat.

- **Hydrological Defense:** The "wide river" mentioned in the topographical descriptions served as the first line of defense. The currents, tides, and depth of the river created a natural barrier against infantry assaults. Any attacking force would be compelled to use boats, forcing them into a naval engagement where the defenders of Pangkalan Rama held the advantage of local knowledge and elevated firing positions.³
- **The Dense Forest (*Hutan Lebat*):** Surrounding the river and the island was a "hutan tropis yang lebat" (dense tropical forest). This forest was not merely a backdrop; it was an integral component of the defense system. The density of the primary rainforest rendered the movement of large armies impossible, effectively funneling all traffic onto the river, where it could be monitored and controlled from the island.³

3.2 The Topography of Power: The Central Hill

The internal geography of the island was dominated by a *bukit* (hill) at its center. In the cosmology of the Malay world, influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions of the *Mount Meru*, elevation was synonymous with divinity and sovereignty. The decision to site the **Istana Mahligai** at this "titik tertinggi" (highest point) was both strategic and symbolic.

- **Surveillance (The Panopticon):** From the verandas of the palace on the hill, the Sultan and his admirals could survey the entire surrounding landscape. They could monitor the "lalu lintas kapal-kapal tradisional" (traffic of traditional ships) navigating the river, distinguishing between friendly merchant vessels and potential hostile fleets long before they reached the docking range.³
- **Flood Immunity:** The elevation ensured that the royal seat remained dry even during the monsoon seasons, when the river might swell and inundate the lower settlement. This physical separation reinforced the social stratification: the ruler resides above the waters, while the subjects live with its rhythms.

3.3 The Defensive Perimeter: *Pagar Benteng Kayu*

The prompt specifies that "seluruh kawasan pulau" (the entire island area), including the

palace and the "pemukiman pendukung" (support settlement) below, was protected by a **pagar benteng kayu** (wooden fortress fence).

- **Materiality:** These walls were likely constructed of *Nibong* or Ironwood (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*), timbers known for their density and resistance to rot. The construction would have involved double-palisades filled with compacted earth, creating a wall capable of absorbing the impact of small-calibre artillery or ramming.
- **Scope:** The enclosure of the common settlement within the fortress walls is a critical detail. It indicates a "compact city" model, where the agricultural and mercantile population was brought inside the defensive perimeter during times of crisis. This symbiotic relationship—the people feeding the garrison, the garrison protecting the people—was the foundation of Pangkalan Rama's resilience.

4. Architectural Analysis: The First Istana Mahligai

4.1 Concept and Form

The original Istana Mahligai, constructed shortly after 1119 CE, was a "struktur kayu yang megah dan besar" (grand and large wooden structure). The terminology "Mahligai" implies a structure of exceptional verticality and refinement, often associated in literature with the private apartments of the royalty.

- **The Stilt Paradigm (*Konstruksi Panggung*):** The palace was built on "tiang-tiang tinggi" (high stilts). This is the quintessential feature of Austronesian architecture. The stilts served multiple functions:
 - **Climatic:** They allowed the prevailing winds to pass *under* the floor, cooling the building via the stack effect.
 - **Hygiene:** They separated the living quarters from the damp ground, vermin, and waste.
 - **Status:** The height of the stilts directly correlated with the status of the occupant. The King's stilts were the highest, ensuring his head was physically above all others.

4.2 The Tiered Roof (*Atap Bertingkat*)

The roof of the Istana was its most defining silhouette. Described as "atap bertingkat" (tiered roof), it likely consisted of three to five tiers, tapering towards the sky.

- **Symbolism:** In the Hindu-Buddhist cosmology that still permeated the region in the 12th century, the tiered roof represented the celestial mountains. Even as the court may have been transitioning to Islamic norms under Bahram Syah, the architectural language of power remained rooted in the ancient symbols of the mountain.
- **Curvature and Carving:** The "ukiran kayu yang rumit" (intricate wood carvings) on the fascia boards (*papan cantik*) and the "detail ornamen berwarna emas" (gold ornaments) served to dematerialize the heavy timber structure. The gold caught the tropical sunlight,

turning the palace into a beacon visible from the river mouth—a lighthouse of political authority.⁴

4.3 Orientation and Outlook

The palace was oriented "menghadap ke arah sungai" (facing the river). This orientation was not accidental. The river was the highway of the world; by facing it, the palace engaged directly with the source of its wealth and the primary vector of threat. The palace looked down upon the "pemukiman penduduk" (residents' settlement) on the lower plains, creating a visual tableau of the feudal hierarchy: the ruler watching over his flock.

5. The Great Fire: A Catastrophe of State

5.1 The Event

Sometime during its history, the grandeur of the first Istana Mahligai was reduced to ash. The report notes a "kebakaran hebat" (great fire) that occurred "pada malam hari" (at night).

- **Vulnerability:** The reliance on timber, thatch, and resinous varnishes made traditional Malay palaces highly combustible. A lightning strike, an overturned oil lamp, or an act of sabotage could trigger an uncontrollable conflagration.
- **Total Loss:** The fire "melalap seluruh struktur kayunya" (consumed the entire wooden structure). The speed of the destruction, aided by the night winds from the river, would have been terrifying. The "night" timing suggests a period of chaos, panic, and the inability to mobilize effective firefighting measures.

5.2 The Crisis of Legitimacy

The destruction of the palace was an existential crisis. In the Malay world, the palace is the repository of the *Regalia* (the sacred objects of rule). If the palace is lost, the *Daulat* of the ruler is questioned. Was this a sign of divine disfavor? The immediate aftermath of the fire would have been a period of intense political fragility. The decision to rebuild—quickly and more grandly—was therefore a political necessity. It was an act of defiance against fate, a statement that the dynasty of Bahram Syah endured.

6. The Reconstruction: The Second Istana Mahligai

The rebuilding of the Istana Mahligai was a transformative project. The new structure, rising from the ashes of the old on the exact same "titik tertinggi" (highest point), was designed to be an even more potent symbol of authority. Based on the visual reconstructions and the prompt's data, the second palace represented the zenith of Pangkalan Rama's architectural

achievement.

6.1 Architectural Evolution: The Grand Facade

The reconstructed palace "mengadopsi arsitektur megah dan tradisional" (adopted grand and traditional architecture) but with significant enhancements.

- **The Enhanced Roof:** The new roof structure was "menjulangi tinggi" (soaring high) with "ujung-ujung yang melengkung" (curved tips). This curvature is evocative of the *Lancang* (ship) aesthetic or the *Minangkabau* buffalo horns, explicitly linking the architecture to the maritime identity of the people. The "puncak" (peaks) were adorned with gold ornaments, likely *tunjuk langit* spires that pierced the sky, acting as lightning rods for both weather and spiritual power.
- **The Gold Standard:** The prompt emphasizes that "aksen emas digunakan secara ekstensif" (gold accents were used extensively). Gold was applied to the *lis atap* (roof eaves), the *tiang* (columns), and the *pagar balkon* (balcony railings). This extensive gilding suggests a period of economic prosperity, likely funded by the taxes levied on the trade flowing past the island. The gold was not just decoration; it was a method of "sacralizing" the building, marking it as a space distinct from the mundane world.⁴

6.2 Structural Authority: The Columns and Staircase

Two features defined the ground interface of the new palace:

1. **Tiang-Tiang Kokoh:** The "solid wooden pillars" used in the reconstruction were likely larger in girth than their predecessors, selected from the oldest Ironwood trees in the interior. They projected an image of unshakeable stability.
2. **Tangga Utama:** The "tangga utama yang lebar" (wide main staircase) was a new or emphasized feature. In Malay court protocol, the staircase is a transitional zone of immense importance. It is where the subject leaves the earth and ascends to the presence of the King. A wide staircase allows for ceremonial processions, where envoys and bearers of tribute could ascend in formation, enhancing the theatricality of the court.

6.3 The "Serambi" and Social Space

The "pagar balkon" (balcony railings) mentioned implies the existence of a broad *Serambi* or veranda. This was the semi-public face of the palace. It was here that the Sultan would appear to his people gathered below. The intricate carvings on the facade served as a backdrop for these public audiences, telling stories of ancestry and power through their floral geometries (*Awan Larat*).

7. Urban Integration: The Reborn Settlement

7.1 The Integrated Fortress Complex

The reconstructed Istana did not stand in isolation. It was the "pusat dari seluruh kompleks Pangkalan Rama" (center of the entire Pangkalan Rama complex).

- **The Settlement Matrix:** Below the palace, on the "lereng bukit" (hill slopes) and "area yang lebih rendah" (lower areas), the settlement was reorganized. "Rumah-rumah kayu tradisional yang lebih kecil" (smaller traditional wooden houses) clustered around the hill. This proximity was protective; in the event of a raid, the populace could retreat up the hill towards the citadel.
- **Infrastructure:** The mention of "dermaga" (piers) and "jalan setapak" (pathways) indicates a structured urban plan. The piers were the economic lungs of the city, where goods were loaded and unloaded. The pathways connected the waterfront to the residential zones and the palace, creating a circulatory system for the flow of tribute and orders.

7.2 The Defensive Ring

The "pagar benteng kayu" (wooden fortress fence) was restored and likely strengthened. It encircled the "perimeter pulau" (perimeter of the island), creating a clear boundary between the wildness of the river/forest and the order of the city. The gatehouses of this fortress would have been heavily guarded, controlling access from the piers to the inner sanctum.

8. The Maritime Economy: Life on the River

8.1 The "Ramai" River

The prompt describes the river as "ramai" (bustling) with "berbagai jenis kapal layar tradisional dan perahu kecil" (various types of traditional sailing ships and small boats).

- **Typology of Vessels:**
 - **Kapal Layar (Ocean-going):** These would include the *Jong* and *Bahtera*, large trading vessels capable of crossing the South China Sea. They brought ceramics from China, textiles from India, and spices from the Moluccas. Their presence at Pangkalan Rama confirms its status as a significant entrepot.
 - **Perahu Kecil (Riverine):** These smaller craft served the local logistics—fishing, transporting fresh water, and moving goods from the hinterland (forest products) to the main port.
- **Strategic Control:** The location "di tengah sungai" allowed Pangkalan Rama to tax this traffic. The *Syahbandar* (harbormaster), operating under the regulations of the *Kitāb 'Azīmat*, would have managed the anchorage, ensuring that dues were paid and that the market remained orderly.⁵

8.2 The Forest Hinterland

The "hutan tropis yang lebat" (dense tropical forest) surrounding the settlement was the source of the kingdom's export wealth. Camphor, dragon's blood, benzoin, and gold dust were extracted from these forests by the indigenous tribes (*Orang Asli*) and brought to Pangkalan Rama to be traded for salt, iron, and cloth. The symbiotic relationship between the river-port and the forest-hinterland was the economic engine of the state.

9. Conclusion: The Legacy of 1275 CE

The active period of Pangkalan Rama is noted to end or transition in **1275 CE**. This date is significant in Southeast Asian history, coinciding with the aggressive expansion of the Singhasari kingdom under Kertanegara (the Pamalayu expedition) and the impending Mongol Yuan dynasty incursions. It marks the close of the "middle period" and the beginning of the rise of Singapura and later Malacca.

Pangkalan Rama, with its **Istana Mahligai**, stands as the bridge between these eras. It demonstrated that in the vacuum left by Srivijaya, the Malay people did not descend into anarchy. Instead, under leaders like Bahram Syah, they built sophisticated, fortified cities that codified law, managed international trade, and produced architecture of breathtaking beauty.

The Istana Mahligai—twice built, once destroyed—is the enduring symbol of this resilience. Its tiered roofs and golden spires, rising from the mist of the Bintan river, proclaimed a simple truth: that even in an age of chaos, civilization could be carved from the forest and the sea. The reconstruction of the palace was not just a building project; it was the reconstruction of the Malay political soul, preparing it for the golden ages yet to come.

Table 1: Chronological Development of Pangkalan Rama

Era	Year / Period	Event / State
Foundation	1119 CE	Arrival of Bahram Syah al-Bahrī . Drafting of the <i>Kitāb 'Azīmat</i> . Founding of Pangkalan Rama Citadel. Construction of the First Istana Mahligai .

Consolidation	1120 – c. 1200 CE	Establishment of trade networks. Fortification of the island perimeter. Growth of the support settlement.
Crisis	Undetermined Date	The Great Fire. Destruction of the First Istana Mahligai at night. Temporary loss of administrative center.
Renaissance	c. 1200 – 1275 CE	Reconstruction of Istana Mahligai. Introduction of gold ornamentation, wider staircases, and enhanced <i>Lancang</i> roof styles. Peak economic activity.
Transition	1275 CE	End of the primary active period. Shift in regional power dynamics (Rise of Singapura/Majapahit).

Table 2: Architectural Specifications of the Reconstructed Istana Mahligai

Architectural Feature	Description & Function	Symbolic Meaning
Atap Bertingkat (Tiered Roof)	Multi-layered roof structure with curved, soaring tips.	Representative of Mount Meru (Cosmic Mountain); connection between Earth and Heaven.

Ornamen Emas (Gold Ornaments)	Extensive gold leaf on roof peaks (<i>puncak</i>), eaves (<i>lis</i>), and railings.	Symbol of <i>Daulat</i> (Sovereignty) and divine favor; visual beacon for river traffic.
Konstruksi Panggung (Stilts)	Elevated on large, sturdy ironwood pillars (<i>tiang kokoh</i>).	Protection from floods/vermin; physical elevation of the Ruler above the subjects.
Tangga Utama (Main Staircase)	Wide, grand staircase leading to the main entrance.	The "Stage of Ascent"; utilized for ceremonial processions and diplomatic receptions.
Ukiran Kayu (Wood Carving)	Intricate floral/geometric carvings on the facade.	<i>Awan Larat</i> motifs symbolizing infinity and the continuity of the lineage.
Contextual Siting	Located at the highest point of the island (<i>Bukit</i>).	The "Panopticon"; strategic surveillance of river and sea; cosmological center.

Karya yang dikutip

1. Kitab Azimat e Padshah e Darya | PDF - Scribd, diakses Januari 12, 2026, <https://www.scribd.com/document/917939873/Kitab-Azimat-e-Padshah-e-Darya>
2. Verifikasi Sejarah Bintan 865 Tahun | PDF - Scribd, diakses Januari 12, 2026, <https://id.scribd.com/document/908538389/Verifikasi-Sejarah-Bintan-865-Tahun>
3. Full text of "Journal Of The Malayan Branch Of The Royal Asiatic Society 1927 Vol V", diakses Januari 12, 2026, https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.281668/2015.281668.Journal-Of_djvu.txt
4. KABA CINDUA MATO.pmd, diakses Januari 12, 2026, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/05/Cindua_Mato.pdf
5. GENTLEJANUS,MERCHANTPRINCE - Brill, diakses Januari 12, 2026, <https://brill.com/downloadpdf/display/title/23382.pdf>